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Mothers Against Gun Violence and the Activist Buffer

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Abstract
As the epigraph attests, knowledge production by women deserves increased attention; doing so contributes to better interpreting the domains and conditions of our lives. This broad claim may not seem controversial, yet marginalization of African American women's perspectives continues within academic and popular discourse. One occasion when publics pay attention to African American women is upon the tragic deaths of their children. Specifically, mothers of urban homicide victims face important rhetorical moments that facilitate how individuals and urban communities respond to such violence. Local and national news media sponsor this response as well, as reports feature the reactions of victims' mothers, placing them in the position of having to make meaning of their children's deaths and thereby endow these children's lives with value in a racist culture that devalues African American youth, the most likely victims of gun violence (Beard et al.; Ferdman; Light; Reeves and Holmes; Sugarmann). For the Mothers Against Gun Violence (MAGV) in Syracuse, New York, the organization at the center of analysis here, buffer rhetorics unite individual mothers' experiences to form a communal activist identity.

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Mothers Against Gun Violence and the Activist Buffer

Abby M. Dubisar

Female contribution to knowledge making must be recognized to give a fuller understanding of the world in which we live.

—Elaine Richardson
"Protect and Serve": African American Female Literacies (677–8)

As the epigraph attests, knowledge production by women deserves increased attention; doing so contributes to better interpreting the domains and conditions of our lives. This broad claim may not seem controversial, yet marginalization of African American women's perspectives continues within academic and popular discourse. One occasion when publics pay attention to African American women is upon the tragic deaths of their children. Specifically, mothers of urban homicide victims face important rhetorical moments that facilitate how individuals and urban communities respond to such violence. Local and national news media sponsor this response as well, as reports feature the reactions of victims' mothers, placing them in the position of having to make meaning of their children's deaths and thereby endow these children's lives with value in a racist culture that devalues African American youth, the most likely victims of gun violence (Beard et al.; Ferdman; Light; Reeves and Holmes; Sugarmann). For the Mothers Against Gun Violence (MAGV) in Syracuse, New York, the organization at the center of analysis here, buffer rhetorics unite individual mothers' experiences to form a communal activist identity.

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I use the term *buffer rhetorics* to highlight an embodied activist performance that often goes unnoticed and unrecognized. Buffer rhetorics include these characteristics: 1. An embodied position committed to responding to violence in manners adaptable to various audiences. 2. A networked tactic for activism that enables individuals to both address their audiences as spokespeople while also unifying a community to express love and support for one another, often through public mourning and grief. 3. A stance that ranges from presence to direct action, able to be mediated online as well as in person. The purpose of this strategy is to locate a set of responses to trauma when individuals may feel shocked and distraught by a homicide, overcome by grief and pain, and frustrated with a lack of substantial intervention in and attention to infrastructural prevention of urban gun violence. Further, buffer rhetorics sponsor healing and center mothers' and other individuals' stances and experiences.

I present here a case study of MAGV in order to demonstrate the ways activist buffer rhetorics enable individuals to fulfill their rhetorical goals through MAGV's unique approach to public mothering as a form of buffering. I assert the activist buffer as a reaction to urban gun violence in order to expand activist rhetorical education, broadening students' abilities to identify and understand the ways individuals respond to urban homicide. Buffer rhetorics can be found in other situations, both historically and currently. They can be found in Mamie Till Bradley's insistence that the nation mourn her fourteen-year-old son Emmett's 1955 lynching. They can be found in the work of Angel Action Wings volunteers who stand and hold large panels of white fabric to shield mourners from anti-gay Westboro Baptist Church protestors. They can be found in the growing attention to "bystander behavior" as a powerful method to interrupt bullying and sexual assault as well as gun-based violence, including the CeaseFire Violence Interrupter program in Illinois. In each of these scenarios, the characteristics of buffer rhetorics appear as activists strategize ways to put themselves between public audiences and perpetrators and their victims and mourners.

Studying MAGV illuminates a framework for understanding African American women's activism by showcasing how these particular mother–activists occupy local public spaces as buffers and how this buffer stance travels, mediated online in videos and news stories, as MAGV and others adapt the strategy to meet audience needs. In this essay, I offer MAGV's history and describe the activist buffer. I then address the embodied, networked, and mediated aspects of MAGV's rhetorical strategies by analyzing examples of their buffering before turning to implications and conclusions that connect to other examples of mother-based organizations currently addressing gun violence and gun control. My analysis here is based in part on the notes I took at the 2008 Ray Smith Symposium: Feminist Rhetorics for Social Justice at Syracuse University, where MAGV mem-

bers spoke. In order to collect evidence of how MAGV's buffer stance circulates through local and national news media, I also incorporate follow-up research conducted on the online and television representation of MAGV. Such sites are rich repositories: in the years since the symposium, MAGV's work continues to grow and evolve as their buffer stance engages different audiences.

Connecting MAGV to Rhetorical Studies of Maternal Activism

> *In our urban community, our children live in trauma.*
> —Lepa Jones, president, Mothers Against Gun Violence (qtd. in Hand)

Speaking at the Ray Smith Symposium in 2008, MAGV's cofounder, Helen Hudson, described the organization's beginning and how her stepson's homicide death prompted her to start MAGV in 2005. Since its founding, MAGV generally defines gun violence as murders in the urban Syracuse communities in which its members live. To start MAGV, Hudson called on mothers from families who were similarly bereaved and formed a network in order to provide support to one another. Right away the group also focused on reaching young adults in their communities. Recounting the history of MAGV, Hudson describes how MAGV began approaching and continues to reach out to young people. MAGV members "talk to youths on street corners, networking and making connections with those who feel lost and unloved. [Such individuals] responded to this mothering and show themselves to be respectful and bright but lacking in the sense that people care about them" (Women Transcending Boundaries). Since its beginning, the group has performed a public caring role. Their roles have broadened over time. For example, MAGV activists are now included as integral members of Syracuse's Trauma Response Team, indicating the local impact of their approach.

Such an approach links their work with traditions addressed by feminist scholars such as Katrina Bell McDonald, who notes that the "norm of solidarity and collective survival through community mothering practices has been characterized as Black 'activist mothering'" and "othermothering," a matrix of "complex practice[s] of biological mothering, community mothering, and political activism" (776, citing Naples). MAGV's history reflects this complex matrix since its members speak from their own mothering experiences, perform public mothering, and conduct these activities as activists. Further describing her experiences and rhetorical strategies, Hudson explained at the Syracuse symposium that on the Sunday following a homicide, the MAGV activists always hold a candlelight vigil at the place where the violent event occurred, so that instead

of isolating themselves in their own homes or becoming increasingly scared and cut off from one another, members of the victims' families and other community members now have a public space to share their grief. MAGV helps convert the location of the homicide into a location of healing. For Hudson, healing is a process, and MAGV facilitates that process by encouraging community members to gather and reappropriate spaces in productive and collective ways. This aspect of MAGV's origins further connects with African American women's rhetorical history. Tamika Carey defines "rhetorics of healing," for example, as rhetorical practices built upon literacies and knowledge systems related to the protection, preservation, and improvement of self and community. In Carey's terms, such rhetorics become resources writers draw upon as "forms of agency to intervene in crises affecting members of their communities" (40–1). Further, such vigils parallel other women's and mothers' antiviolence movements, inviting public mourning and offering renewal to a place of violence (Berkowitz; Bouvard; Currans; Fisher).

Attention to MAGV's communal maternal identity expands the ways that African American women's activism has been defined by scholars and the public as well as how such activism has been and remains performed—as conducting anti-lynching campaigns; leading civil-rights actions and organizations; organizing protests; delivering speeches; holding rallies; organizing strikes, sit-ins, and other occupations of spaces; and publishing newsletters and other print material to broadcast messages—and invites a broader perspective to notice and acknowledge activism. Mother-based activists and movements have drawn scholars' interest as they address what a position of public mothering offers social justice work (Buchanan; Lewiecki-Wilson and Cellio; Seigel). Activist organizations and individuals who connect their work with mothering both historically and contemporarily address diverse topics, such as stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons, public policy regarding breastfeeding, rejecting war, promoting hip-hop feminism, and many more, showing the adaptability of mother-based arguments. Such activists conduct their activism in public spaces such as town squares or neighborhoods, among many other places, and in forms of public speech and writing, both fiction and nonfiction (Fischer; Moravec; Pough, "What It Do, Shorty?"; Swerdlow, *Women Strike*; Van Esterik; Yaszek).

Mother-based arguments can, however, alienate rhetors from audiences for a number of reasons. MAGV and other mother-based groups risk being misinterpreted as essentializing mothers as a monolithic group instead of promoting a diverse range of ways to perform mother-based activism or mourning as a parent. And rhetoric scholars' focus on white women's maternal rhetorics may overlook how the effectiveness of and responses to such rhetorics often hinge on intersectional factors such as racial identity (Boris). Also, activists themselves

face potential backlash from those who argue that positions based on mothering frameworks maintain the status quo and homogenize women and mothering (Abrams; Swerdlow). Yet, despite the risks and consequences, MAGV organizes around mothering and publicizing this role as a shared stance for healing and speaking out against gun violence. In doing so they affirm a belief that "motherhood taps into a cultural code and generates rhetorical resources that are useful for forwarding change. [So] rhetors attuned to both the promise and peril of maternal rhetorics can employ them carefully, wisely, and well" (Buchanan 23). While authors such as Buchanan address the drawbacks and rewards of maternal rhetorics for women themselves, assessing the available means of persuasion for mothers of those who have died from homicide reveals why deploying maternal rhetorics is unavoidable, but also potentially powerful.

Despite its ongoing complications as a rhetorical position, identification rooted in mothering remains influential. Stephanie Hartzell, for example, describes the capacity of Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin's mother, to motivate the reactions to her son's death that inspired the Black Lives Matter movement: "Trayvon Martin's mother's ability to elicit mass identifications between the public and her son was crucial in this case becoming a catalyst for movements for racial justice, demonstrating the power of maternal appeals in activist rhetoric" (64). Thus, the tragic position of a homicide victim's mother endows her with a rhetorical role that audiences recognize and to which they can connect. Some might say this position obligates these women, or at least pressures them, to consider taking on that role. In Krista Ratcliffe's detailed coverage of how scholars have understood and defined identification, she notes that "because people are always historically and culturally situated, so, too, are the embodied identifications" (49). MAGV's maternal activism is embedded in their identification with one another and their neighborhoods, yet their ability to also identify with external audiences as public mothers and buffers further enables a transcendence of community and context. They can address audiences beyond their neighborhoods, reaching publics who may come from diverse race, class, and gender backgrounds. Relying on identification through motherhood and mothers' responsibility to preserve individual and community life thus fosters connections that may not be available otherwise, perhaps the only means of persuasion available.

Defining the Activist Buffer

As their history shows, MAGV members embody an activist position—the buffer—that accommodates a variety of ways to respond to urban gun violence. Described earlier, the activist buffer is an adaptable, embodied position de-

veloped from audience needs, a networked approach that positions activists as spokespeople while also unifying communities in expressions of support and love and a role that ranges from presence to direct action, addressing live audiences as well as mediated to broader publics. MAGV's buffer derives its power from public mothering and MAGV members strive to identify with various audiences—including young people, newly bereaved families, police departments, and other community members—to respond to homicide. While the women of the Million Mom March, Moms Demand Action, and others engage with gun control policies and legislation among a broad range of related issues, Syracuse MAGV activists focus on the lives of young people potentially caught up in gun violence, not the guns themselves or the access available to such weapons.

Hudson explained to the symposium audience how MAGV activists act as liaisons, positioning themselves between a number of entities including families with loved ones who have been killed, city hospitals, and the Syracuse Police Department. In their community roles, MAGV activists have knowledge about life in the neighborhoods experiencing the most homicides as well as obtaining access to information from the police, including statistics on the demographics of those affected by gun violence in Syracuse. Hudson described how MAGV activists embody knowledge of mothering within the African American communities affected by such events so they can communicate productively with families who do not want to engage with authorities themselves. The MAGV women described for the symposium attendees how, for them, discussion invites understanding. MAGV members thus facilitate exchanges of information through their own positions as buffers and experts.

MAGV combines these various types of activist buffering by performing the direct action of public mothering as well as emphasizing presence, making themselves available to various audiences. MAGV's emphasis on being present in neighborhoods and sites of homicides connects with Lisa Shaver's argument that presence can be a powerful persuasive strategy, relevant to not only nineteenth-century women's activism but also more recent social justice work including Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. Further, MAGV's buffer approach is illuminated by its demonstration of mother-based identifications, reflecting a conception of rhetoric as "embodied social experience" (Royster and Kirsch 131) and attending to how rhetors access persuasive power. The importance of the buffer approach similarly permeates the work of scholars studying women rhetors and those studying African American women's rhetoric specifically (Atwater; Carey; Eves; Logan, *With Pen and Voice*, "Black Speakers"; Pough, *Check It*, "Empowering Rhetorics," "What It Do"; Richardson; Ritchie and Ronald; Royster) because such individuals act from marginalized positions to address audiences.

Buffering rhetorics' accessibility to various audiences makes it essential to acknowledge potential tensions between rhetors and audiences and to recognize that navigating identification in US culture, specifically, comes with racial implications. Scholars have "mapped spaces for a rhetorical agent who possesses personal agency (albeit limited) even as that agent is socialized by enveloping cultural discourses" (Ratcliffe 52–3). Such spaces are embodied differently depending on a person's identifications. And thus identification rooted in mothering can perhaps transgress racial tension. As Ratcliffe describes, "White America . . . has had the unearned privilege to ignore non-white America's discursive fields even as non-white discourses permeate all of American life" (75–6). Identification in mothering and expressions of love for children, even grown children who MAGV speakers address, become reliable strategies used by rhetors who seek connections with disengaged white audiences. Importantly, mother-based activist stances also work to reject unjust responsibility placed on mothers for their children's homicide deaths as well as unfair connections placed between those who commit homicide and their upbringing. Such victim blaming of parents—especially mothers—is perpetuated by local and national news media and other outlets that do not want to address racism, mental illness, lack of infrastructural resources, and other root causes of crimes (Frazier and Halton-Tiggs; "Parents Judged"; Wemple).

As the following sections demonstrate, the activist buffer is embodied, networked, and mediated. MAGV members occupy public gathering spaces and vigils after homicides to facilitate healing. They also act as spokespeople and liaisons and engage forms of direct action, broadcasting public service announcements and directing their work to young people in other ways. These three categories help to organize examples of MAGV's work and illustrate buffer rhetorics. However, these categories also show the permeability of boundaries between these performances, which are not meant to be firm so that the distinctions can be blurred.

Embodying the Buffer

Buffer rhetorics include embodied positions as individuals react to gun violence in ways that can be adapted to various audiences. MAGV members use their bodies and embodied language to speak out against violence, comfort others, and express other emotions such as love and frustration. Expressions of mother grief reflect an embodied experience as the physical pain suffered by her dead child, prolonged by lack of justice, transfers and impacts her own body as a physical and emotional wound. Such pain endures even when news coverage of a specific incidence of gun violence ends.

As MAGV's buffer position shows, embodying public mothering to represent the impact of gun violence serves their goal of maintaining various audiences' attention on the atrocity of murder. For example, a 2009 Syracuse newspaper article that covers a MAGV vigil and features a photo of Hudson hugging another woman shows embodied buffering. Hudson's face and embracing hands face the camera (Greenlar). In the accompanying article, Tim Knauss reports that,

> sixteen people gathered in the chilly evening air tonight in Syracuse to remember a slain cab driver and to pray that gun violence soon comes to an end. As they held hands in a circle at the corner . . . the men and women prayed for the family of Timothy Gordon Jr., who was shot near that spot Jan. 30 by a passenger in his cab. ("Group Mourns")

Knauss quotes Hudson as saying, "Change is not coming as fast as we would hope. . . . A lot of mothers are feeling the pain. A lot of mothers are hurting." Knauss indicates that police have accused a twenty-year-old man of shooting Gordon in the head to avoid paying cab fare. Physically, Hudson's body is providing care as a buffer, comforting the other woman in the photo. Such physical embraces protect people from the camera's gaze and from exposure to others. Further, such gestures create sympathetic and empathic connections. Like the handholding mentioned in the article, mourning gun violence can involve physical touches of care that MAGV members willingly provide to soothe people at the vigils. The newspaper's photographs invoke healing for readers of the article who may be considering their own reactions to urban homicide in Syracuse, inviting them to grieve for Gordon in the manner modeled by MAGV members.

This invitation to grieve is further transitioned into an opportunity to act and for community members to become buffers. Another MAGV member at the event, Dulce Collette-Lloyd, whose son was twenty-nine when he was killed, is also quoted as saying that all members of the community have to "step up" to prevent additional gun violence, especially young people, who "should have the courage to call the police if they see someone with a gun" (Knauss, "Group Mourns"). A third MAGV member, Rachel Titus, states that she believes the community "grows stronger as people gather to mourn the victims and to commit themselves to ending violence. We'll see a difference. . . . We're making a difference." Balancing Titus's hopeful quotation with Hudson's point that change is not occurring reveals the differential impacts that MAGV's buffer roles may have for grieving families in comparison to actually decreasing homicides. At the vigil setting, however, embodied tropes of stepping up by calling or otherwise reporting gun presence to the police invites listening audiences to become buffers who can prevent future homicide as positive action. Likewise, Titus's embodied metaphors of growing stronger through gathering imagine a healthy

and thriving future community, free of gun violence, and dependent on the vigil attendees' and audience members' actions.

Embodying the buffer role beyond the vigil setting, Hudson also spoke at a 2016 National Gun Violence Awareness Day event. Because many attendees at that event were likely unfamiliar with MAGV's work, Hudson explained how the organization started by stating that "there were babies being murdered and left in the street and no one was saying anything. . . . We figured we had to do something. We didn't know what to do but we had to do something" (C. Baker). Telling this origin story engages audiences in how to understand Hudson and other MAGV members' standpoints as mothers taking action, harnessing power that is rooted in Hudson's and other mothers' bereavement. Such a narrative particularly resonates for attendees at an anti–gun violence event. The language that Hudson uses to invoke an imagined scene of babies being murdered and abandoned creates shock and alarm to remind audiences of the outcomes of gun violence and invite them to imagine themselves as mothers reacting as MAGV members did, by taking grassroots action to try to save helpless victims from future homicides.

Another example of the embodied nature of buffering can be found in a 2015 Syracuse news story that features a video recording of a speech delivered by MAGV president Lepa Jones. The video records a vigil held after A'Nickalous Hill, described as a thirty-two-year-old father of three, was shot to death (O'Toole, "Rallies"). Jones performs buffering, as the video recording shows, by describing her own mother-activist body and the public position she has embraced. She begins by stating, "Enough is enough. I've been standing here about two years now. I don't see a lot of change" ("Mother Speaks Out Against Violence"). She goes on to align herself with Hill's family and the other MAGV members present at the vigil by recounting the embodied experience of attending her child's funeral. Doing so uses the embodied buffer position to describe such an event for audiences who have not had the same experience. She says, "Us mothers that have buried our children, we can never get it back" ("Mother Speaks Out Against Violence"). Further describing her position and issuing a call for solidarity, she later states, "They took my son's life and my stepson's life to put me in this position to say, 'You know what? I'm going to stand strong. I'm not going to let my head fall. I'm going to stand with the rest of these mothers and I'm going to go out and get my community back.'" She also connects with mourning members of the neighborhood and Hill's family, joining them together as audiences and describing how they can relate to one another in a healing way. She continues by describing members of the community as a family, noting how family members have participated in embodied traditions and events together, including attending school together and eating

meals together. Thus, they should see one another as part of a unified community of Syracuse and not engage in feuds that can follow homicides. Then she makes the following suggestion:

> Instead of speaking so much negative energy into our children, we need to speak positive into existence. That's what we have to do. Because our children are a reflection of us regardless if our kids is 7, 15, 19, 22, 32, or 42 . . . your child is a reflection of you, and it starts with us. We've got to change ourselves before we can change anything around us. For the rest of my life I represent mine. . . . I speak them into existence . . .

Jones's speech represents how the buffer role testifies to MAGV members' ways to embody their own grief experiences and their catalyzing force for activism. By explaining that her son's life was taken from her in order for her to "save a lot of other lives," Jones transitions a passive or immobilizing mourning stance into the activist buffer role, one focused on the guidance and instruction young people need. She describes the experience of suffering the death of a child and how grief perpetuates itself, declaring, "It'll never get better. Just through time it'll get a little easier learning to live without your child. Because anything that you bring into this world, when it's ripped away from you unexpectedly, you will never, ever, ever have a closure to a tragic death" ("Mother Speaks Out Against Violence"). By drawing on her experience and acknowledging the pervasive power of grief, her extemporaneous speech creates a context for considering how to make a mourning stance an activist role. After announcing an upcoming MAGV event, Jones concludes with a unifying message: "Stop the violence. United we stand. Divided we fall. We are our brother's keepers. It's time for us to come together as a team, stand together as a unity, and let's stop the violence" ("Mother Speaks Out Against Violence"). If her immediate audience is looking for a way to take up this call, the upcoming MAGV event that Jones describes provides an opportunity, one that is also extended to readers of O'Toole's article and viewers of the accompanying video, "Mother Speaks Out Against Violence." Here again, using sports and family metaphors places individuals together in embodied ways that can enable them to protect and comfort one another, as MAGV members have modeled through their own buffering of communities and audiences.

The embodied buffering by Jones further shows how grief can turn into activism. She expresses frustration in her speech, showing that grief and healing processes include anger, especially when homicide rates are not decreasing. Beyond speaking to her own experience as a mother of murdered sons, Jones also uses the embodied buffer position by speaking for individuals connected to Hill. Since MAGV mothers include many mothers of adult homicide victims, the organization does not only gather to mourn and address the deaths

of young children: it performs public mothering and grieving for victims of all ages, highlighting that they are all someone's child. Since Hill's family may not want to or be able to deliver a speech in their neighborhood or at the scene of the crime, Jones builds on her identification with their experience and relates her knowledge to theirs, acting as a buffer between concerned audiences and Hill's family and community.

Buffering between concerned audiences is also shown as Jones embodies the buffer role to address multiple audiences in a 2016 video interview, broadcast on Syracuse television news and archived online (Hand). In this video, she explains that MAGV is committed to violence prevention beyond holding vigils and offering trauma response. She says, "Violence is not the answer. Before we even get to that point, we're trying to prevent it." The white interviewer, host of the local weekend news show, responds by saying, "It's so obvious to say that, but it doesn't necessarily compute for a young person." Jones counters this positioning of young people as ignorant by stating, "Well, actually, in our urban community, our children live with trauma. So we try to do a lot more education on helping them to try to prevent it." Jones further explains that many young people are experiencing loss or other stressors that create upheaval in their lives. Her explanation has the potential to reverberate beyond the host to the viewing audience, reinforcing her position as MAGV's leader and spokesperson, as well as the community it serves. Embodying the buffer here reveals its ability to address multiple audiences, constituencies that may be quite differently positioned, here including the white interviewer and white audiences watching the news in their homes. Aware of these multiple audiences, Jones uses the platform of the interview to defend urban youth in Syracuse and describe their needs of education and infrastructure, a position that news reports rarely—if ever—adopt.

Embodying the buffer includes making the most of buffering opportunities that present themselves, including the platform provided by the news stations. Jones goes on to list all the positive endeavors currently undertaken by young people, countering stereotypes and educating the host and the viewing audience. Through her explanation of her work and that of her community, Jones illustrates the ongoing efforts MAGV makes to address community needs. Further describing the importance of MAGV's efforts, Jones claims that progress is most attainable if the entire community gets involved. MAGV hopes to recruit as activists all mothers and community members, not just those who have suffered the loss of children. Invoking an audience of viewers who care about youth in Syracuse and broadening her authority as a mother-activist, Jones says, "It's not just mothers who have lost their children. They are all our children" (Hand). Jones's appearances on news media outlets featuring her speeches at vigils and interviews about her MAGV work broadcast to publics the buffer position MAGV sustains, promoting education and change.

Networking the Buffer

MAGV's work also reveals buffer rhetorics as networked approaches for activism. Buffer rhetorics position individuals to both direct messages to audiences as spokespeople, as the embodied examples of Hudson and Jones show, and also unify communities to express love and support for one another and work for justice. They also facilitate public mourning and grief. In her telling of MAGV's origin story, Hudson recounts how she recruited mothers of homicide victims in order to establish a network of people who could comfort and encourage each other. She also described MAGV's work to address networks of young people who need support and to hear the message that they are loved and appreciated. Other networks also include MAGV members in their work to address Syracuse homicide and providing support to communities experiencing violence.

Networking their buffer approach distributes MAGV's presence as experts who make essential contributions to and connections with various groups and communities. These contributions have been recognized in multiple ways. On an individual basis, Hudson transitioned her MAGV work into a position on the city council and was elected majority leader in 2014, an endorsement that implicitly validates the impact of her MAGV role for Syracuse voters. She describes her skills, including her "ability to bring people together . . . an ability to be able to work with almost anybody" (Knauss, "After Two Quiet Years"). Such unifying abilities played a key role in her design and guidance of MAGV as an organization, leading also to members' contributions to the Trauma Response Team (TRT) that signal the local impact of buffer rhetorics. In their case study of the TRT, Timothy Jennings-Bey and colleagues note that often up to 150 interested family members, community members, and witnesses show up at the hospital after an incident of gun violence, and the TRT members, much like MAGV, act as liaisons, or buffers, "among the victim's family, friends, police, doctors, nurses, and emergency personnel" (951). The authors particularly note that TRT coordinates with MAGV and that MAGV is responsible for "follow up with the families of victims and perpetrators" (951). To this end, MAGV holds regular visits with mothers and other family members, even assisting the family by connecting them to financial resources to help with burial expenses. As a network, the TRT positions MAGV to act as a buffer when and where it is needed. By considering the particulars of grieving a homicide death, we can see the importance of the buffer role of providing ongoing support to grieving publics. As the TRT case study shows,

> [t]rauma in response to murders involves the grief of loss, as well as rumination on the event and the perpetrator, feelings of helplessness to prevent the next murder, secondary trauma, and the uncertainty (and inability to control) when

> such violence will happen next. The affected people are not simply experiencing grief, which means that traditional grief counseling may inadequately address the harm that they suffer. (948)

MAGV members can identify with such complexities of grief and provide tailored, personal support as they serve as buffers between grieving families, police officers, and other involved individuals. Their mother-based buffer approach operates quite differently in these networks from the authority of hospital employees and criminal justice workers to aid affected individuals in ways those service providers cannot.

Both researchers and community leaders endorse the networked buffer work MAGV members have done for years, support that endows MAGV with authority. A more recent follow-up study to the TRT article, written by some of the same authors as the TRT publication, reveals that the homicide rate in Syracuse is increasing (Lane et al.), a reality that amplifies frustrations expressed by Jones and Hudson in their public MAGV work. In fact, combatting the systemic racism and pro-gun legislation pervading Syracuse and the United States writ large requires infrastructural change beyond MAGV's range of influence. Despite these limits, MAGV's buffer work within Syracuse's violence response remains essential. Lane and associates describe the TRT's future plans for reducing violence and traumatic stress experienced by residents in Syracuse's' gunshot cluster areas: "1) to directly intervene to cut the cycle of feuding and retaliatory violence, 2) to begin to restabilize the community, by reducing the traumatic stress, and 3) to increase mechanisms for community input into the interventions" (455). Further marking MAGV's influence as buffers working in networks, elementary school vice principal Najah Salaam Jennings-Bey relies on MAGV in her efforts to improve the response to the violence experienced by students at her school, drawing on her own experience of violence, including the murders of two childhood friends (McMahon). Schools and other educational programs represent other networks in which MAGV can perform buffer rhetorics, spaces in which mother-based arguments traditionally find listeners and those who need care, especially young people living among the trauma of urban violence.

Addressing such trauma motivates their buffer work, which remains rooted in motherhood and community commitment. Taken together, the audiences addressed through their various networks again show how their buffer rhetorics cross constituencies and bring together diverse groups and institutions who may not value disenfranchised youth, including schools, the justice system, and local and national media. At the most recent MAGV vigil, held at the place where two brothers were killed, Jones expressed sorrow for all the families involved, both the victims and the accused. She invoked another community network

that includes and unifies all people affected by a homicide, resisting a division between families of victims and those accused. Using unifying language at the same event, Hudson states, "We're going to light these candles for these two young brothers and . . . to touch the minds of our young people to get them to understand that they are cared about and get them to understand that we do love them and . . . that they cannot continue to run around our city, wreaking havoc, taking another person's life" (O'Toole, "Syracuse").

Mediating the Buffer

MAGV vigils and members' speeches and interviews also circulate beyond the immediate situation as they are sometimes archived online by Syracuse news outlets. Such distribution and documentation allows their buffer rhetorics to travel to broader publics and for longer durations than the length of a vigil or speech. Buffer rhetorics can be mediated and mobilized, not only crossing network and audience boundaries, but also ranging from presence to direct action, transgressing rhetorical situations and platforms. Evidence of MAGV's buffer approach can serve as a tragic archive representing the long history of Syracuse homicides that must be recognized and not forgotten, as publics are likely able to do. MAGV members commit themselves to maintaining attention to homicide victims.

As Hudson's telling of the MAGV origin story attests, much of MAGV's buffering work happens at places where homicides have occurred and where they host vigils. MAGV activists pivot between providing buffer roles in public spaces and being present at all funeral and wake events for homicide victims in order to let victims' families know that they are not alone in their grief. MAGV members make themselves available to be with grieving families and identify with their experiences. In addition to holding vigils, meeting grieving families, and speaking for MAGV on the news, MAGV activists also perform buffering roles in the form of direct action. They insert themselves into the spaces where their children spend time to address them directly and use television to reach them. These mothers have occupied the spaces where their young-adult and teenage children like to gather during the evenings. While occupying these street corners, the mothers hold large signs with positive messages such as "We love our kids." Their mission during such moments is to "let young people know how valuable they are" (Hudson). MAGV members have come to understand that when their children spend so much time away from home, the importance of familial love and appreciation can get lost or forgotten. In their estimation, the more individuals feel loved and valued, the less likely they are to engage in violent acts with and against one another. These mothers' actions, then, medi-

ate between private home spaces and public gathering spaces and importantly reject responses of fear by emphasizing love. They literally invoke mother-based affection to show children their value to the community.

MAGV members develop their buffer responses to urban homicides by creating place-based opportunities to express love and support through their mothering positions. While many uses of buffering serve to turn audiences into mourning mothers who can imagine the loss of a beloved child, MAGV members also adapt buffer rhetorics to shift away from discussing children to addressing children, using television to reach youth audiences directly. MAGV's 2008 video, announced via several Syracuse news outlets and archived on YouTube, acts as a public service announcement (PSA) to remind viewers that, as it is titled, "Dead Is Forever." In this 38-second video, which opens by showing a crime scene featuring yellow caution tape and a police car with flashing lights, several mothers are shown holding photos of their deceased sons and standing by their sons' grave markers. Other still photos are shown to symbolize how gun violence has killed fathers of small children, graduates, and other men who were important and appreciated members of their communities. The "Dead Is Forever" video is productively sentimental, managing to evoke genuine sadness, and uses a tone of mourning about these preventable, premature deaths. Likewise, the multiplicity of deaths featured in the video enables an understanding of homicide as a significant recurrence. The video fits the genre conventions for a PSA because it has a simple, direct message. The montage of victims' faces juxtaposed with cemetery scenes conveys meaning regarding the multiple deaths that have occurred from the same cause, leaving countable and significant numbers of victims. Audiences, primarily young men, are asked to identify with the individuals in the video, to participate in the collective mourning of the lives of the many sons who were victims of gun violence and reflect on their own lives and how they can prevent the perpetuation of such violence. The script of the PSA is spoken by Hudson and other MAGV members and expresses a mother-based perspective to persuade young men as sons:

> Dead is forever. Hundreds of mothers' sons have been killed on Syracuse's streets in the past 12 years. Your mom wants you to build your life, not see it taken on a street. Don't be part of a death count. Make your life count. Make smart choices. Don't let them kill you, your dreams, [and] your mom's dreams. Make your life count. Make your mom proud. Dead is forever. ("Dead is Forever")

By using the *you* pronoun, MAGV members address their intended audience directly, trying to identify with young people watching the video by connecting their mothers' hopes and dreams for them with the hopes and dreams of these mothers of tragically killed sons.

MAGV uses its "Dead Is Forever" PSA video to interpolate audiences into beloved sons who do not want to disappoint their mothers or make their mothers suffer through grief. The video strives to offer young people perspective, to position them to see their lives as powerful and significant, not disposable, and to identify with their moms in a new way. "Dead Is Forever" also relies on evoking guilt by asking young people to think of their mothers and to make them proud—not disappointed or mournful. Using a presentation of mother grief, the MAGV women want not only productive pity from their audiences but preventative action. An endorsement at the end of the video notes that the county sheriff, city police department, district attorney's office, and a local television station sponsored the video. Since such sponsorship appears at the close of the PSA and not the beginning, however, the mothers' authority and the emotionally rich perspectives they have gained from their experiences are prominent, rather than the ethos of law enforcement.

As an expression of love that further demonstrates MAGV's buffer approach, MAGV's own video relies on the assumption that young people can be motivated to please their mothers and make them proud. According to an article announcing the video, published in the Syracuse newspaper's online edition, the video was scheduled to air on "WSYR-TV, BET, MTV and the Cartoon Network during times when youth normally watch TV" (Ramirez). The article describes a video that matches the simplicity of MAGV's core message—that people who feel loved and valued make better choices and in turn value their own lives. Speaking about the video at a press conference announcing its release, Hudson states, "We are trying to ingrain in the brain that there's other ways to solve conflicts . . . .We're trying to hit all the levels of kids and we found a way—it's television" (R. Baker). MAGV, in its public persona and messages such as this PSA, positions young people as having power and as able to prevent violence; MAGV organizes around its collective purpose—essentially, to keep people alive and loved. As a buffer itself, the video portrays MAGV's communication style, existing in a liminal space between a police-produced antiviolence PSA and a news report about gun violence.

Concluding Limits and Implications

Positioning MAGV within the network of African American women's rhetorics and women's mother-based activism is one effort to address the persistent exclusion of female knowledge-making, highlighted by Richardson in the opening quotation. Especially in regard to systemic racism and gun violence, scholars can seek local rhetorical strategies that are cultivated by communities, approaches found in the buffer rhetorics of MAGV activists. Shirley Wilson Logan insists

that "we need to consider [speakers] as agents in their own performances" ("Black Speakers" 35), developing rhetorical strategies to meet their goals and audiences' needs. Studying MAGV responds to this call, which Logan elicits in regard to Black female rhetors and, by extension, all female speakers. Mothers' experiences are available for co-optation by local and national news media and other power brokers who try to define mothers in light of their children's tragic deaths. Thus, MAGV activists work to make their own meaning of their role and to create the possibilities of engaging various publics. Clearly more work can be done to include such activism in rhetorical studies. Other organizations similar to MAGV adopt different approaches that may be more easily recognized by audiences as well as holding other benefits and drawbacks. For example, the Million Mom March, held in 2000, has received a great deal of attention from scholars, likely due not only to its size but also its invocation of the march as a rhetorical form. At times it has been described as the Mothers Against Drunk Driving campaign for guns, linking to another well-known mother-based campaign (Deam). Analysis of the march reveals a significant limit to invoking mother-based arguments, however, including the fact that such claims are flexible enough that the counter-demonstration, the Second Amendment Sisters' Armed Informed Mothers March, deployed similar mother-based strategies but for the opposite purpose (Huse).

Beyond locally focused organizations such as MAGV, scholars can turn attention to other organizations that address gun violence from mother-based perspectives, attending to those who increasingly address gun violence as a public health issue. Such perspectives and rhetorical strategies in other locales include CeaseFire Illinois's "violence interrupter" initiative, featuring interrupter Ameena Matthews; Chicago activists who deploy a range of strategies, especially displaying symbolic caskets in public spaces and connecting neighborhood violence with police violence (Bloom and Sabella); Philadelphia's Mothers in Charge who offer grief support as well as training in mediation; Moms Rising, who also contribute to legislative change, uses their website to invite visitors to offer personal stories of experiencing gun violence and works to address multiple social justice issues. These initiatives and others all offer various and overlapping ways to respond to gun violence, both locally and nationwide. Part of the significance of MAGV's work, also present in the work of other activists, is their continued availability to respond and be present to use buffer rhetorics. Unlike representations of grieving mothers that end once another news headline takes over, MAGV maintains their visibility.

Extending beyond the buffer to examine how maternal activist rhetorics travel, more work can be done to map strategies that rely on, adapt, and possibly even appropriate maternal rhetorics for diverse audiences in a range of public

spaces. As Patrice DiQuinzio notes, activists' own definitions of mothering are complicated by social and economic positions, replete with significant racial, ethnic, and class differences. Such intersections can more broadly inform identification of the range of ways mother activists respond to gun violence. Doing so enhances teacher-scholars' and students' understanding of activist rhetorics and how they operate, as well as reflecting the diverse types and contexts of gun violence that activists address. As Rosa Eberly argues, "Gun violence in the United States cuts across distinctions among races, between public and domestic spaces, and among rural, urban, and suburban places, although it affects different people differently" (356). These significant differences inform additional and ongoing versions of buffer rhetorics.

Mother-based activism continues to motivate lots of individuals and may be getting greater recognition. For example, in presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's "Mothers of the Movement" video, the mothers of Dontre Hamilton, Eric Garner, Jordan Davis, Sandra Bland, and Trayvon Martin tell how their children's deaths affected their lives and inspired their activism. The video was published a few months before nine members of Mothers of the Movement endorsed Clinton and spoke at the Democratic National Convention (Craven). As Eileen Boris notes, "black women's reliance on motherhood . . . challenge[s] the subordination of African Americans" (48). For Samaria Rice, Tamir Rice's mom, however, not endorsing a candidate raised awareness of the lack of substantial change initiated by political leaders. Twelve-year-old Tamir was fatally shot by a Cleveland police officer in 2014. Writing on her blog, Samaria Rice argued, "I've waited to see if any candidate or official, including my state's governor, would release a plan of action that addressed the failures and inhumane decisions responsible for my son's death." None have done so.

Social media increasingly mobilizes maternal activism related to gun violence and gun control, including via blogs and other platforms. Public service announcements like MAGV's, and their capacity to go viral via social media, also deserve greater consideration, especially those made by young people to address young people. According to Paek and colleagues, "[Videos] produced by a perceivably similar peer were more effective in the enhancement of attitudes towards the PSA and issue importance" (179). Other ways mother-activists maintain authoritative positions is as spokespeople, similar to MAGV's buffer-as-liaison. After the election of Donald Trump, for example, *The Guardian* called on the Mothers of the Movement to comment on the outcome of the election and its implications for civil rights, connecting the mothers' activism to the advocacy of Emmett Till's mother, which was also communicated through grieving (Latif and Latif). The current invocation of Mamie Till Bradley's activism speaks to the resilience of mother-based buffer rhetorics.

By acting as buffers—embodied, networked, and mediated—MAGV activists engage members of their community and offer strategies for how citizens and communities respond to gun violence. For example, Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, is now called on to address other gun deaths, acting as a buffer between public audiences and victim's communities, as do MAGV activists. How mothers themselves meet and expand expectations placed on them is central to McSpadden's comments on the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile:

> When their children are killed, mothers are expected to say something. To help keep the peace. To help make change. But what can I possibly say? I just know we need to do something. We are taught to be peaceful, but we aren't at peace. If we mothers can't change where this is heading for these families—to public hearings, protests un-asked-for martyrdom, or worse, to nothing at all—what can we do?

Failing to pay attention to activists such as MAGV members restricts our access to understand the range of strategies African American women invent and adapt, both when asked to respond to violence and to sustain attention to an issue. MAGV's buffer rhetorics promote education and change, use rhetorical strategies to engage communities and publics, and prevent mothers' perspectives from becoming overlooked and disregarded.

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